

# CONSUMER REPORT



STATE SENATOR 21st District

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## CONSUMER PROTECTION WEEK – MARCH 1-7 , 2009

*“Protecting consumers – a top priority for Senate lawmakers.”*

This interactive report details some recent Senate action on consumer protection and safety.



### Senator Jelinek votes to keep kids safer

A Senate bill now enacted into law will help keep children safer on the road.

Public Act 43 of 2008 (Senate Bill 82) requires that all children under the age of eight, and shorter than 4 feet 9 inches tall, be securely fastened in a booster seat while riding in a car or truck. Michigan now joins 38 others states with an expanded child safety seat law.

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among children over the age of one. In a crash, safety belts that are designed for adults can contribute significantly to a child's injuries. A child sits higher with a booster seat so the seat belt fits properly and provides better protection.

The good news is that booster seats are readily available at most stores. **The best news is that using a booster seat immediately increases child safety.**

**TIP:** Visit [www.michigansafekids.org](http://www.michigansafekids.org) to find more information on child passenger safety and to find a car seat check-up clinic near you.

### Senate acts to protect homeowners

The housing crisis has led to eroding property values across our state. The Senate has been at the forefront with plans to curb fraud and provide greater protections for homeowners.

Senate bills now signed into law:

- Help homeowners refinance their home loans at lower interest rates to avoid foreclosure;
- Require loan officers to register with the state, meet education requirements and undergo background checks; and
- Prohibit lenders and brokers from coercing real estate appraisers to inflate the value of property.



We are currently working on a comprehensive plan to reinvigorate our stagnant housing market by providing a tax credit for purchases of new homes, as well as legislation to bring property taxes in line with home values. No longer will Michigan homeowners have to watch their property tax bills increase while home values plummet. This is an effective and important step in keeping Michigan families in their homes.

**TIP:** Michigan homeowners facing mortgage problems can call the MSHDA Foreclosure Prevention Hotline at 1-866-946-7432.

## New law offers tax credit for home upgrades

Low income residents can receive a tax incentive for buying Energy Star appliances under a new law.

P.A. 287 of 2008 (Senate Bill 1048) provides an income tax credit (ranging from \$75 to \$150) to taxpayers with adjusted gross incomes up to \$37,500 for a single filer or \$75,000 for a joint filer.

Eligible products include insulation, furnaces, water heaters, windows, refrigerators and clothes washers.

Potential consumer savings are significant. For instance, refrigerators bought before 2001 use up to 40 percent more energy than an Energy Star-qualified refrigerator.



**TIP:** Find information on Energy Star energy-efficient products at [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov).

## Senator Jelinek supports fee disclosure for rental cars

Consumers should know how much it costs to rent a vehicle. Sometimes the full cost may not be included in the rental agreement or the information may be unclear.

Public Act 310 of 2008 (Senate Bill 1003) protects consumers by requiring all car rental companies to clearly disclose any and all fees tacked on to a rental agreement. The new law helps consumers clearly understand what they are paying for when they sign a rental contract.

**TIP:** Consult the 2009 Consumer Action Handbook (available at [www.ConsumerAction.gov](http://www.ConsumerAction.gov)) for helpful tips when renting a car.

## Updated dairy laws protect consumers

Milk is a staple for most kids. Updates to the state dairy laws help protect the children and adults who drink milk and consume dairy products.

Public Acts 136 and 147 (Senate Bill 1007 and House Bill 5585) strengthen the rules on the production of milk and foods like yogurt, butter, cheese and ice cream. Among other provisions, the new laws require the pasteurization of milk if it is offered for sale.

Michigan ranks 8th nationally in annual milk production.

**TIP:** The recent large-scale recall of peanut products has heightened consumer interest in food safety. Find out about recalls involving food that may have been distributed in Michigan at [www.michigan.gov/mda](http://www.michigan.gov/mda).

## New laws limit restrictions on gift cards

As holiday presents go, there's probably nothing easier and more popular than gift cards. New laws in Michigan put more protections in place to make sure gift cards won't lose their value.

Under Public Acts 208-211 of 2008 (Senate Bill 388 and House Bills 4680, 4050 and 4317,) money invested in gift cards can't be lost or reduced if the cards aren't used right away. The new laws ensure that cards bought after November 1, 2008 are valid for five years. They also prohibit inactivity fees and prevent stores from changing the terms of the gift card after it has been issued.

**TIP:** Further information on the law, including exemptions, is detailed in a Consumer Alert available at [www.michigan.gov/ag](http://www.michigan.gov/ag). The report also features gift card buying guidelines.





## CONSUMER PROTECTION RESOURCES

Keep this quick guide to helpful phone numbers and websites handy.

Note: Phone numbers and website addresses are subject to change.

- For advice on avoiding consumer scams and rip-offs and other consumer news, visit the Federal Trade Commission website at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov). File a complaint online or call 1-877-FTC-HELP.
- Visit the consumer section at [www.insurancefraud.org](http://www.insurancefraud.org) to learn about insurance scams and how to avoid them.
- Learn how to protect your personal information, and manage your money better at [www.mymoney.gov](http://www.mymoney.gov).
- Get practical tips to guard against Internet fraud at [www.OnGuardOnline.gov](http://www.OnGuardOnline.gov).
- Visit <http://postalinspectors.uspis.gov> to learn about mail fraud and theft.
- Stay informed about product safety news, including toy hazard recalls, at the Consumer Product Safety Commission website at [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov). Or call 1-800-638-2772.
- Access the “one-stop shop” for U.S. government recalls at [www.recalls.gov](http://www.recalls.gov).
- Eliminate most telemarketing calls. Sign up for the National Do-Not-Call Registry from your home phone at 1-888-382-1222 or online at [www.donotcall.gov](http://www.donotcall.gov).
- Read about the latest Internet schemes identified by the FBI and the National White Collar Crime Center at [www.ic3.gov/](http://www.ic3.gov/).
- Get the facts on how to invest wisely and avoid fraud at [www.sec.gov/investor.shtml](http://www.sec.gov/investor.shtml).
- Stop unsolicited prescreened credit card offers. Call 1-888-5OPT-OUT (1-888-567-8688).
- Monitor your credit report on a regular basis to make sure only the accounts you’ve started are listed. To order your free annual credit report, call 1-877-322-8228 or go online to [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com).
- Check out a business or charity at the Better Business Bureau of Western Michigan website at [www.westernmichigan.bbb.org](http://www.westernmichigan.bbb.org). Or call 616-774-8236. (BBB of Detroit & Eastern Michigan website at [www.easternmichiganbbb.org](http://www.easternmichiganbbb.org). Or call 248-644-9100.)
- Having trouble paying your mortgage? Find information at [www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/foreclosure](http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/foreclosure) or call the MSHDA Foreclosure Prevention Hotline at 866-946-7432.
- For help in deciphering monthly telephone charges, access the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) consumer bulletin, Understanding Your Telephone Bill, at <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/understanding.html>.
- The state of Michigan holds millions of dollars in lost or forgotten assets from dormant bank accounts, uncashed checks, valuables in safe deposit boxes and stock certificates. Find out if you have unclaimed property at [www.michigan.gov/treasury](http://www.michigan.gov/treasury).
- Even in tough economic times, Michigan citizens give generously to help others in need. Whether your donations help people in local communities or around the world, it’s important to know how your money will be used. Find a list of licensed charities and more at [www.michigan.gov/ag](http://www.michigan.gov/ag). Click on Charities on the right sidebar.



Click on the book to access the newly revised **Consumer Protection Resource Guide**, or contact my office for a print copy. This book has everything you need to know about consumer rights and Michigan law: how to protect yourself from consumer fraud and how to take legal action.